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ABSTRACT

Aggression scores were obtained from 132 preadolescent inner city males to test the hypothesis that paternal absence may lead to both increased and decreased aggression. The subjects were 55 black, 25 Puerto Rican, and 52 white males between the ages of 9 and 13. They attended elementary public schools in Newark, New Jersey. A statistically significant two-way race by parental absence interaction analysis indicated that, when compared to their racial counterparts living with both parents, Puerto Ricans living with one parent were equally as aggressive as other youth. Whites were found to be more aggressive and blacks were less aggressive. Also, overcompensation and local minority group status increased aggression among whites, and maternal identification and local majority group status decreased aggression among blacks. (Author/AM)

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Aggression and Paternal Absence: Racial Differences Among Inner-City Males

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ABSTRACT

Aggression and Paternal Absence: Racial Differences Among Inner-City Males

Aggression scores were obtained from 132 preadolescent, inner-city males to test the hypothesis that paternal absence may lead to both increased and decreased aggression. A statistically significant two-way "race" by "paternal absence" interaction term indicated that, when compared to their racial counterparts living with both parents: Puerto Ricans were equally as aggressive; Whites were more aggressive and Blacks were less aggressive. We concluded that: both Puerto Rican subgroups were most aggressive due to minority-group status; overcompensation and local minority group status increased aggression among Whites; and, maternal identification and local majority-group status decreased aggression among Blacks.

Aggression and Paternal Absence: Racial Differences Among Inner-City Males

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It is generally recognized that, when compared to the total population, a relatively higher proportion of American inner-city children are reared in father-absent households (Pettigrew, 1964; Moynihan, 1965; Schlesinger, 1966). Although paternal absence obviously affects all children, researchers have concentrated their efforts on the effects of father-absence upon the male child (Biller, 1970; Biller & Weiss, 1970).

It has been suggested that the male child living in a father-absent household tends to develop strong feminine identifications as a result of imitating maternal models; which, in turn, operate to keep overt, observable aggressive behaviors at relatively low levels (Bandura and Walters, 1963; Biller and Borstelman, 1964; Sears, et al, 1946). Tests of this hypothesis have indicated that males from father-absent homes are significantly lower on measures of observable aggressive behavior than males from two-parent homes (Bach, 1946; Lynn and Sawrey, 1959; Sears, 1951).

However, an alternative hypothesis concerning the effects of father-absence on the personality development of the male child invokes the process of overcompensation as a defense mechanism against overly feminine identification with the mother (Miller, 1958). Overcompensation, according to this view, will frequently result in exaggerated forms of masculine behavior which may find overt expression as undesirable aggressive behavior. Tests of this hypothesis have revealed that males reared in father-absent homes manifest significantly more aggressive behavior than males living in two-parent homes (Bacon, Child and Barry, 1963; McCord, McCord and Thurber, 1962).

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The present paper represents an attempt to test the notion that these two sets of mutually-exclusive and contradictory hypotheses and findings may both be operative; that in some cases, maternal identification will result in lower levels of observable aggressive behavior and, in other cases, over-compensation from maternal identification will result in higher levels of observable aggressive behavior. The simultaneous consideration of both hypotheses has resulted in the present attempt to further specify the factors and conditions associated with the differential effects of paternal absence on aggressive behavior.

One factor that may be associated with differential effects of paternal absence is race membership. While the effects of father-absence on the aggressive behavior of the male child has been often studied, research on the effects of father-absence interacting with the race of the family on aggressive behavior among preadolescent males has received considerably less attention. Hetherington (1966) reported no difference in aggression scores of black and white preadolescent males from father-absent homes. However, small sample size did not permit Hetherington to do an adequate analysis of inter-group and intra-group differences.

Another factor that may be associated with differential effects of paternal absence is the social setting surrounding the home. All subjects of the present study resided in an urban, inner-city environment. Social class membership has been associated with both father absence and levels of aggression. The subjects of the present study were predominantly of working class membership.

Thus, the present study represents an attempt to investigate the possible differential effects of father-absence interacting with the race of the family on aggressive behavior among inner-city, preadolescent males.

Method

Subject

The subjects were 55 Black, 25 Puerto Rican, and 52 White males (total subjects=132) between the ages of 9 and 13. All subjects attended elementary schools in the Newark, New Jersey public school system. In terms of paternal-absence; 22 Black subjects lived in father-absent households and 33 lived in father-present households; 12 Puerto Rican subjects lived father-absent households and 13 lived in father-present households; 16 White subjects lived in father-absent households and 36 lived in father-present households.

Information concerning parental occupations was obtained from every subject as an approximation of socio-economic status. Since 80% of the total sample fell within the unskilled laborers, clerical, unemployed and welfare categories, an appropriate SES statement about the total sample would be that it is: "predominantly working class."

Materials

Aggression was measured using an adaptation of the physical and verbal categories employed by Walters, Pearce, and Dahms (1957). Two SOMA three-dimensional puzzle games designed by Heinz (1969) were used to create a situation in which to measure aggressive behavior. A questionnaire was designed to obtain information about Father absence or presence in the household. In every case, children whose father was absent lived with their mother; in every other case, the two parents were present in the home. Video tapes were used to record subjects' aggressive responses.

Procedure

Aggression Session - The informational questionnaire was individually administered to each subject and responses were recorded by the experimenter.

During the aggression sessions, subjects were observed in a room consisting of only members of their respective race, grade and family income grouping. To avoid suggesting to subjects that they should act aggressively, they were advised that they were participating in a program to determine whether the SOMA puzzle can be used as a teaching device in mathematics. Subjects were informed that "the object of the game is to build a cube with the pieces of the puzzle." The experimenter demonstrated how the SOMA puzzle pieces can be put together in a cube shape.

Subsequently, each group of subjects in the observation room was sub-divided into two equal teams and assigned the task of building a cube, with a time-limit of 15 minutes, using seven SOMA puzzle pieces of different shapes. To increase motivation and interest, subjects were advised that the team which completed the task in the shortest period of time would receive rewards (candies). The only rule stated was that "each individual must remain in his chair during the game and failure to cooperate may lead to the disqualification of his entire team." Subjects were video-taped during this phase of the study. Prior to the video-taping of aggression sessions, subjects were video-taped for 10 minutes while engaging in free-play activities. This procedure was employed to desensitize them to the camera and microphones.

Rating of Aggression

Using the definitions of Walters, Pearce, and Dahms (1957), an aggressive response was recorded from the video-taped record each time it occurred for each subject during the aggression session. The total

physical aggression score for each subject is the sum of all physical aggressive responses displayed during the session. The total verbal aggression score for each subject is the sum of all verbal aggressive responses displayed during the aggression session. Finally, the total aggression score for each subject is the sum of the physical and verbal scores. Walters, Pearce and Dahms (1957) originally scored the presence or absence of each type of aggressive response. The scores of the present study were based upon the total number of instances of each aggressive behavior as observed by two independent observers who scored responses from the video-tapes separately. Inter-rater reliability coefficients were r=.99 for total aggression scores.

Results

A nested factorial analysis of variance was performed with race and number of parents as main effects and with race and number of parents nested within groups using the total aggression scores as the dependent variable. Table 1 contains the means for all groups of this analysis.

TABLE I

Total Aggression Scores:

Race and Number-of-Parents Effects

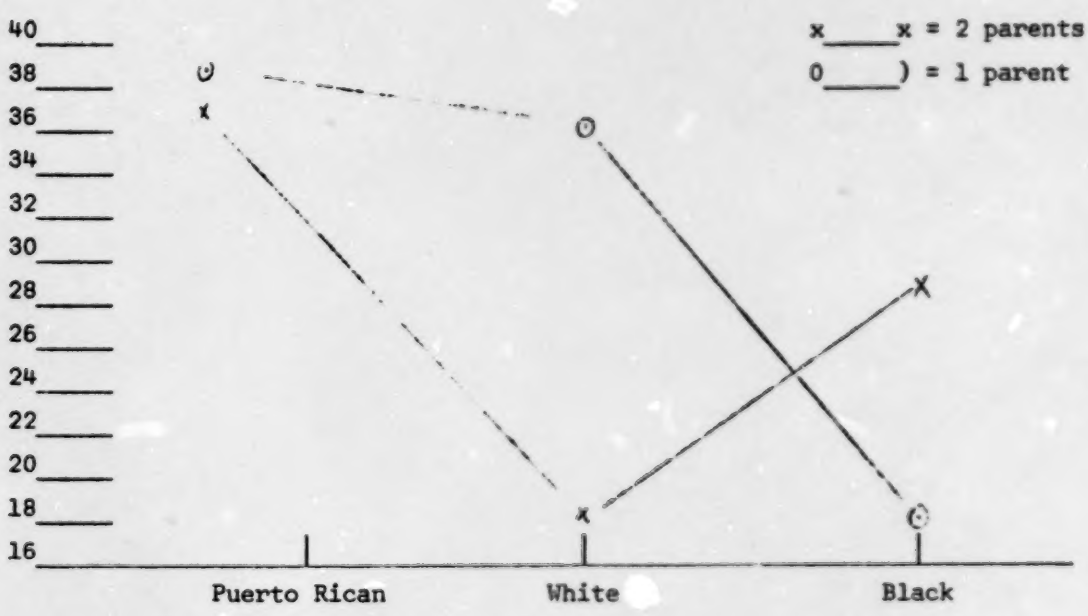
	Puerto Ricans			White			Black			Total	
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean
Two-Parents	13	37.31	20.14	36	19.28	26.26	33	26.48	19.27	82	25.04
Father-Absent	12	38.00	17.39	16	35.89	32.89	22	16.69	12.97	50	27.88
TOTAL	25	37.64		52	24.33		55	22.56		132	26.11

The ANOVA results indicated that the main effect of "number-of-parents" was not significant and that the overall main effect of race revealed the Puerto Rican subjects to be significantly more aggressive than either the White or Black subjects ($F = 4.68$; $df = 2,104$; $p<.01$) and that no significant differences exist in total aggression scores between the White and Black groups.

The most interesting result of the above analysis of the total aggression scores data is the significant two-way interaction between race and number-of-parents ($F = 4.65$; $df = 2,104$; $p < .01$)

As may clearly be seen in Figure 1, a disordinal interaction occurs between the White and Black groups in which there is an increase of total aggression among the White subjects associated with paternal absence (as compared to the two parent situation) and there is simultaneously a decrease of total aggression among Black subjects associated with paternal absence.

Figure 1



Discussion

The major finding of the present study is that: when race and number of parents are simultaneously studied in a subject population consisting of inner-city, predominantly lower-class, preadolescent males; a significant interaction occurs. Specifically, white subjects from father-absent homes display more total aggression than their racial counter-parts living with both parents and black subjects from father-absent homes display less aggression than their respective racial counterparts.

The direction of this significant race by number-of-parents interaction seems perplexing, and rather strange, until one realizes that Newark is one American inner-city wherein, for some time now, the population majority is Black. As early as 1970, approximately 55 percent of the population was Black, about 30 percent was White and the remaining 10 percent was predominantly Puerto Rican. Thus, an indisputable fact of inner-city life in Newark is that our Black subjects are majority-group members locally (but a national minority) and our white subjects are minority-group members locally, (but majority-group members nationally). Only the Puerto Rican subjects are members of both a local, and a national minority group.

Thus, the speculation that racial minority/majority group status may be associated with observable levels of aggressive behavior leads to the following conjectures:

a) The Puerto Rican subjects, by virtue of being both a local and national minority group (and the latest arrivals), may find themselves in an urban setting wherein an overt, aggressive, "macho" posture in preadolescent males may be considered appropriate by that group, especially in the school setting wherein the language barrier so often exacerbates the "minority" syndrome. This may help to explain why the Puerto Ricans manifested signifi-

cantly more observable aggressive behavior than either of the other two groups. It may be that the father-absence variable, in this group, and under these circumstances, is obscured by the strong ceiling effect of expected "macho" aggressivity. This may help to explain why the means of the Puerto Rican group were so high and so close for both the father-absent and two-parent subgroups.

b) The White subjects of the present study are currently the minority remnants of a once white majority group in the City of Newark. The process of overcompensation for maternal identification in the father-absent group may be operative. This would help to explain why the total aggression scores of the father-absent group are higher than those of the two-parent group. The combination of overcompensation and the current minority status may have summated to produce the relatively high mean score of the White males from father-absent homes.

and, finally, c) The Black subjects in Newark are clearly members of the majority group in the local population. The process of maternal identification may have been operative in this group. Thus, the relatively lower aggression scores of the father-absent subgroup may have been due to both majority group membership and to maternal identification.

Our results clearly indicate that a significant race-by-number-of-parents-in-household interaction exists in the total aggression scores of Puerto Rican, White and Black preadolescent males in an inner-city setting. We have invoked speculations concerning racial majority/minority group status, overcompensation for maternal identification and direct maternal identification to explain these results.

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